

Study urges wild-man look in nuclear posture

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Internal Pentagon report calls enemies' fear of irrational response useful

By John Diamond
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WASHINGTON — The United States should maintain the threat of nuclear retaliation with an "irrational and vindictive" streak to intimidate would-be attackers such as Iraq, according to an internal military study.

The study, "Essentials of Post-Cold War Deterrence," was written by the Defense Department's Strategic Command, a multiservice organization responsible for the nation's strategic nuclear arsenal. It was obtained under the Freedom of Information Act by an arms control group and published Sunday in a report on U.S. strategies for deterring attacks by antagonistic nations using chemical, biological or nuclear weapons.

"Because of the value that comes from the ambiguity of what the U.S. may do to an adversary if the acts we seek to deter are carried out, it hurts to portray ourselves as too fully rational and cool-headed," the 1995 Strategic Command study says.

The London-based think tank British-American Security Information Council cited the Strategic Command document in its report as an example of the Pentagon's push to maintain a mission for its nuclear arsenal long after the Soviet threat disappeared.

Winning internal battle

The London group's report portrays the command as fighting and winning an internal bureaucratic battle against liberal Clinton administration officials who lean in favor of dramatic nuclear weapons reductions. Citing a range of formerly classified documents ob-

tained through the Freedom of Information Act, the report shows how the United States shifted its nuclear deterrent strategy from the defunct Soviet Union to so-called rogue states: Iraq, Libya, Cuba, North Korea and the like.

In its study, the Strategic Command uses Cold War language in defending the relevance of nuclear weapons in deterring such potential adversaries.

"The fact that some elements (of the U.S. government) may appear to be potentially 'out of control' can be beneficial to creating and reinforcing fears and doubts within the minds of an adversary's decision makers," its report said. "That the U.S. may become irrational and vindictive if its vital interests are attacked should be a part of the national persona we project to all adversaries."

Game theory

The idea of projecting an aura of irrationality was not original to Strategic Command. It dates at least as far back as the early 1960s, when Harvard Professor Thomas Schelling was writing his groundbreaking works on game theory and nuclear bargaining.

"It is not a universal advantage in situations of conflict to be inalienably and manifestly rational in decision and motivation," Schelling wrote. These were ideas later adopted by Henry Kissinger and President Richard Nixon in using coercive air strikes on North Vietnam as a way of forcing Hanoi to the bargaining table in the latter stages of the Vietnam War.

In 1997, two years after Strategic Command advanced its latter-day version of this theory, President Clinton approved a directive on U.S. nuclear policy that upheld the "negative security assurance" that the United States will refrain from first use of nuclear weapons against signatories to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, a list that includes Iraq, Iran, Libya and North Korea.

The policy, however, includes exceptions that presidential advisor Robert Bell said have been "refined" in recent years. They would allow responding with nuclear weapons to attacks by nuclear-capable states, countries that are not in good standing under the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty or states allied with nuclear powers. Iraq, which the United States regards as violating international atomic weapons restrictions, could be one such exception.

Navy Lt. Laurel Tingley, spokeswoman for the Omaha, Neb.-based command, said she could not comment on the London council's report until it could be reviewed in detail. She restated the command's basic policy guidance that deterrence of attacks involving nuclear, chemical or biological weapons is "the fundamental purpose of U.S. nuclear forces."

'Negative feelings' toward weapons

Worried that the Clinton administration wanted to end the command's role, officials at the organization circulated an internal memo in 1993 that referred to then-Assistant Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, who was in charge of proliferation and arms control issues, as having "negative feelings" toward nuclear weapons. Background information on Carter, the command document said, indicated "a less than favorable long-term outlook for nuclear weapons" and long-term visions of "complete denuclearization."

Carter, now at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, said in a telephone interview that the Strategic Command saw its influence within the Pentagon waning as budgets for nuclear weapons were slashed after the Cold War.

At the Pentagon, Carter was trying to develop non-nuclear options for retaliating against rogue attackers who used weapons of mass destruction, he said, "because any president would surely prefer to have nonnuclear options."